

## Distillation of Styrene

## Description

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The invention relates to a process for the distillation of vinylaromatic monomers in the presence of 4-tert-butylcatechol and oxygen.

10 In order to increase its stability in storage, styrene is usually shortstopped with from 10 to 20 ppm of 4-tert-butylcatechol (TBC) and stored in the presence of traces of oxygen.

15 Sulfur, nitrophenols and nitroxyl compounds, for example, are known to be useful for prevention of polymerization during distillation.

WO 96/16921 describes prolongation of the inhibition period during the distillation of styrene in the presence of nitroxyl inhibitors and small amounts of oxygen.

20 Synergistic inhibitor mixtures of 2,6-dinitro-p-cresol and phenylenediamine or 4-tert-butylcatechol are described in US 4,468,343 and like mixtures of phenothiazines, 4-tert-butylcatechol and 25 2,6-dinitro-p-cresol are described in US 4,466,904. These polymerization inhibiting systems are used in the presence of oxygen.

30 The inhibitor systems described for the distillation of styrene possess a comparatively high degree of toxicity or are relatively expensive.

It is thus an object of the invention to find a cheap process for the distillation of styrene. Another object is to find an advantageous and efficient process for the destabilization and purification of styrene to which 4-tert-butylcatechol has been added 35 for transportation.

Accordingly we have found a process for the distillation of vinylaromatic monomers in the presence of 4-tert-butylcatechol (TBC) 40 and oxygen, wherein no aromatic nitro or amine compound is present in any effective amount.

The vinylaromatic monomer used can be, for example, styrene,  $\alpha$ -methylstyrene, vinyl toluene, divinyl benzene, styrenesulfonic acid or a mixture thereof. The process is preferably used for the 45 distillation of styrene.

Distillation can be carried out in conventional distillation assemblies, such as multi-plate, packed or unpacked distillation columns. For the purpose of destabilizing and purifying styrene to which 4-tert-butylcatechol has been added for transportation, 5 it is usually sufficient to use a distillation column having one plate or a simple evaporator.

In a preferred embodiment, the 4-tert-butylcatechol (TBC) is fed to the distillation apparatus together with the vinylaromatic 10 monomer. Preferably the concentration of 4-tert-butylcatechol at the bottom of the column is in the range of from 100 to 15,000 ppm, particularly from 5,000 to 10,000 ppm, based on the vinylaromatic monomer.

15 In addition to 4-tert-butylcatechol there can be added polymerization inhibitors such as are conventionally employed for the distillation of styrene. Examples thereof are nitroxyl inhibitors, particularly sterically hindered nitroxyl compounds such as are described in WO 96/16921. However, the process of the invention is distinguished by the fact that the addition of further 20 polymerization inhibitors is not usually necessary.

The process of the invention is usually carried out at temperatures ranging from 40° to 125°C and preferably from 60° to 80°C.

25 Since any oxygen dissolved in the styrene is rapidly consumed under the said distillation conditions, oxygen should be additionally fed to the distillation apparatus, for example by metering an oxygen-containing gas to the bottom of the distillation column 30 through a gas spray.

Better distribution of oxygen in the vinylaromatic monomers is achieved however, when pure oxygen or an oxygen-containing gas, for example air, is mixed in with the stream being fed to the 35 distillation assembly. Preferably an oxygen-containing gas is metered in by a circulating pump mounted on the suction side upstream of the distillation apparatus. This dosage method has the additional advantage that polymerization is inhibited before the vinylaromatic monomer can come into contact with the hot surfaces 40 of the heat exchanger. The oxygen can be metered in at various points, if desired.

The amount of oxygen fed in is governed by the polymerizability of the monomers used and the distillation conditions. The amount 45 may never be so high that an explosive monomer/oxygen mixture is formed. Advantageously the oxygen is metered in at a rate of from

